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THE POET OF DEMOCRACY.

BY JOHN BURROUGHS.

“To PUT the true praise” of an original and first-class man, especially if he be one’s contemporary, “and set it on foot in the world,” is not always an easy matter. Sir Wm. Petty, who used the words I have quoted in conversation with Pepys, said in the same connection that good writers were not admired in their own age because there were so few persons at any time that did mind the “abstruse and the curious.” But there is one class of good writers who are always admired in their own day, and the true praise of whom is quickly set on foot. I mean those writers who use the language and speak the thought of their time.

But there is another class of writers who do not speak the language and the thought of their time, but of a time to come or a time just dawning, whose true praise is slow in getting under way. It is an old story and need not be dwelt upon in connection with our Poet of Democracy, Walt Whitman, whose just appreciation is so tardy in getting ahead among current readers. Probably, however, it is no more tardy than he himself anticipated, as he declared at the outset of his career that he was willing to wait to be understood for the growth of the taste of himself, and that the proof of the poet was to be sternly deferred till his country had absorbed him as affectionately as he had absorbed it. The absorption by a people like ours, so thoroughly under the illusion of the refined and the conventional, of a poet like Whitman must be a slow process, if it ever thoroughly takes place.

It has been the aim of Whitman not only to speak in the democratic spirit, but to exemplify it in his own person, and he has done so with a frankness that has shocked and repelled current readers. The penalty has been that his true praise has been

delayed, and false praise and false censure have vied with each other in misleading the public with regard to him.

The false praise has come from those who simply welcomed him as a great rebel against the current literary mode, or a bold defier of prevailing social conventions. Much as I cherish the memory of the eloquent and chivalrous Wm. D. O'Connor, and great as was his service in many ways to Whitman, I cannot but feel that when he praised him for his outspokenness on matters of sex, because the great masters of the past had been outspoken, his praise was false and misleading. Whitman's friends have no right to appeal in his behalf to a court whose jurisdiction he has denied. "*Leaves of Grass*" is not modelled upon the past; it makes a bid for the suffrage of the future, and if it speaks out freely upon matters of sex, the author must show a deeper reason than the precedents of other times.

His false censure has come mainly from those who had not the wit or the patience to understand him (which is true of the most of his adverse critics), and who, because he was not like other poets, denied that he was a poet at all.

His true praise must be sought in his faithfulness to his own standards, in the degree in which he has spoken in the spirit of democracy, of science, and the modern; not only spoken, but lifted and suffused these things with poetic emotion, his results bearing upon the problems of life in a helpful and stimulating way.

"*Leaves of Grass*" requires a large perspective; you must not get your face too near the book. You must bring to it a magnanimity of spirit, a charity and faith equal to its own. Looked at too closely it often seems incoherent and meaningless; draw off a little and let the figure come out. The book is from first to last a most determined attempt on the part of a large, reflective, magnetic, rather primitive, thoroughly imaginative personality to descend upon the materialism of the nineteenth century, and especially upon a new democratic nation, now in full career upon this continent, with such poetic fervor and enthusiasm as to lift and fill it with the deepest meanings of the spirit and disclose the order of universal nature. The poet has taken shelter behind no precedent, or criticism, or partiality whatever, but has squarely and lovingly faced the oceanic amplitude and movement of the life of his times and land, and fused them in his fervid humanity, and imbued them with deepest poetic meanings. One of the most striking

features of the book is the adequacy and composure, even joyousness and elation, of the poet in the presence of the huge materialism and prosaic conditions of our democratic era. He spreads himself over it all, he accepts and absorbs it all, he rejects no part; and his quality, his individuality, shines through it all, as the sun through vapors. The least line, or fragment of a line, is redolent of Walt Whitman. Whether he makes poetry of it all may be questioned, but he never ceases to rule it and master it.

The thought that is ever fermenting in him, tingeing everything he ever wrote in prose or verse, revolving, taking new forms, ramifying through his whole moral and intellectual nature, and drawing all his energies in its train, was the thought of his country, its present needs, its future prospects. We find him thinking, desiring, loving nothing else, planning, planting, watering for nothing else, writing his poems with the sole purpose to fuse and compact his country. He has touched no theme, named no man not related in some way to America. The thought of it possessed him as thoroughly as the thought of Israel possessed the old Hebrew prophets. Indeed it is the same passion, and flames up with the same vitality and power; the same passion for race and nativity enlightened by science and suffused with the modern humanitarian spirit. Israel was exclusive and cruel. Democracy, as exemplified in Walt Whitman, is compassionate and all-inclusive:

"My spirit has passed in compassion and determination around the whole earth;
I have looked for equals and lovers and found them ready for me in all lands;
I think some divine rapport has equalized me with them.
You vapors, I think I have risen with you, moved away to distant continents, and fallen down then, for reasons.
I think I have blown with you, you winds;
You waters, I have finger'd every shore with you."

Whitman is of the people undoubtedly, but it is not the conscious America that he speaks for and expresses so much as it is the unconscious, the America of destiny and of history, the America that Europe fears and loves and is interested in, and comes here to see and looks in our literature to find, but fails to see or find, or at least only in hints and fragments. The conscious America, the America that has so far expressed itself in our poetry and art and criticism is quite a different thing. Certain traits and aspirations of our people are much clearer-voiced

in the New England poets than in Whitman—in Lowell and Longfellow and Whittier, the aspiration for culture and refinement—for the well-bred, the well-dressed, the well-schooled, the well-churched. The college, the church, the club, the lyceum—the influences and currents they set going—a career of honor and distinction, or of usefulness and respectability—all these things are voiced in our standard poets. What Whitman has expressed, or aimed to express, is more latent and dynamical—more like the climate, the geology and geography, and the brawn and fecundity, of a new continental race. He would not be the schoolmaster of the people, he would be their prophet and savior.

What the modern spirit, the spirit of democracy, means when carried into the sphere of art and poetic utterance may be a question. Whitman has given us his view of its meaning—namely, to effuse the atmospheres of actual concrete life and nature, and not at all the housed and perfumed atmosphere of the accepted poets. This makes his undertaking new and distasteful to current readers.

The lesson of this poet is not merely one in philanthropy or benevolence, it is one in practical democracy, in the value and sacredness of the common, the near, the universal; it is that the quality of common humanity—workingmen, farmers, mechanics, soldiers, sailors, hunters, etc.—is the quality with which a literature for our age and country is to be saturated and filled. The spirit in which our poet writes is that spirit of universal humanity which it shares with all natural open-air objects and processes—the only spirit in which man's concrete life on this globe can be carried forward. We do not live and breathe and grow and multiply, we do not have health and sanity and wholeness and proportion, we do not subdue and improve and possess the earth, in the spirit of something exclusive, exceptional, far-away, aristocratic, but in the spirit of the common and universal. The only demand is that the common or universal shall be vitalized with poetic thought and enthusiasm, or imbued with the ideal of a rare and high excellence. Whitman's poetry is ever looking to superior persons or invoking them, is ever pointing to the grandeur and significance of the common and the near. He lifts things out of a corner, out of a class, and shows their universal relationships—shows that all things are beautiful to him who brings the spirit of

beauty, that all things are divine to him or her who brings the thought of the divine, that all things are great, every one without exception, if you take enough of the picture within vision.

The poems, I say, are bathed and flooded with the quality of the common people; not their crudeness and vulgarity, their half-culture, but with the commonness and nearness which they share with real things and with all open-air nature, with hunters, travellers, soldiers, workers in all fields, and with rocks, trees, and woods. It is only in the spirit of these things that a man himself can have health, sweetness and proportion; and only in their spirit that he can give an essentially sound judgment of a work of art, no matter what the subject of it may be. This is the meaning of Burke's remark that "The true standards of the arts are in every man's power, and an easy observance of the most common, sometimes the meanest, things in nature, will give the truest lights."

"What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me,"

says our poet,

"Me going in for my chances, spending for most returns,
Adorning myself to bestow myself on the first that will take me,
Not asking the sky to come down to my good will,
Scattering it freely forever."

If Whitman's poetry is not also bathed and saturated with a lofty and determined spirituality, if it does not give out the qualities of the noblest thoughts, the most chivalrous behavior, the most stern self-denial, the most uncompromising rectitude, it falls far short of the standards which must be held up to us in this country.

Most of the hostile criticism of Whitman has been aimed at a man of straw. Heine made a vital distinction when he said: "The critic's great error lies in asking 'What ought the artist to do?' instead of asking 'What does the artist intend?'" Very few critics of Whitman have taken the trouble to ask what does the poet intend? what are his aims? what are his methods? They have chosen rather to say, he fails to do this or to do that, he fails to make artistic poems, he fails in the principles of good taste, he fails to observe all the proprieties, he fails to bring us only the pleasing and the beautiful.

Suppose he did not work with this end in view. Suppose that, instead of elaborating a theme, his aim was to exhibit a

man. Suppose that, instead of a book of highly-wrought poetic verse, polished and finished to the last degree—the interest always centering in the theme, never in the man—his purpose was to make a book full of vista and suggestion, full of escapes and outlets, with flowing but incomplete lines, starting thoughts but never elaborating them, begetting beauty, but never courting it, producing the impression of something fluid, protean, generating, like nature herself; with no more outside art than have the clouds in the sky, or the grass in the fields, or the leaves upon the trees, seeing to it only that life and power pulse through it all. We are not troubled about the arrangement of the clouds, or the grass, or the leaves. May not poetic thoughts, images, and concrete objects be so embosomed in a great personality, so charged and vitalized by spiritual emotion, and borne along by such a tide of living power, that we shall rather welcome the escape from conscious art than lament the want of it? It is so in nature; why may it not in a measure be so in poetry? It seems to me the only question is, “Are you man enough?” My own conviction is that Walt Whitman has shown himself man enough. The man-element in his work overtops all others, and gives unity and cohesion to all others. To exploit this man-element, to saturate the land with it, his poems are written. He may well say:

“This is no book;
Who touches this, touches a man.”

We here come upon a marked feature of the poems considered as literary performances, upon which too much stress cannot be laid. It is never so much the theme treated, as it is the man exploited and illustrated. Walt Whitman does not write poems strictly speaking, does not take a bit of nature or life or character and chisel and carve it into a beautiful image or object, or polish and elaborate a thought, embodying it in pleasing tropes and pictures. His purpose is rather to show a towering, loving, composite personality moving amid all sorts of materials, taking them up but for a moment, disclosing new meanings and suggestions in them, passing on, bestowing himself upon whoever or whatever will accept him, tossing hints and clews right and left, provoking and stimulating the thought and imagination of his reader, but finishing nothing for him, leaving much to be desired, much to be completed by him in his turn.

Our interest and profit are always in the poet more than in the

theme. See him moving through life, absorbing and transmuting its elements, drawing out their meaning and value and passing on, identifying himself with all forms and conditions of our national existence and situation, and putting on experience after experience like a garment. See him in the war poems, the tender nurse and father ; see him in "Calamus" the loving comrade, the type of manly affection ; in "Salute au Monde" behold him raising high the hand of fellowship towards the whole world ; in the "Song of the Open Road" and in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" see his large and subtle philosophy and his robust faith and charity :

"Now I reëxamine philosophies and religions,
They may prove well in lecture rooms, yet not prove at all under the
spacious clouds, and along the landscape and flowing currents."

* * * * *

"Only the kernel of every object nourishes ;
Where is he who tears off the husks for you and me,
Where is he that undoes stratagems and envelops for you and me?"

In "Whispers of Heavenly Death" behold him pensive and yearning before the inscrutable mysteries ; in "Sea Drift" see the poet in him trying to syllable the language of the unresting sea ; in the poem of "Myself" see him revelling in the whole universe, giving free rein to every faculty and attribute he possesses, and abandoning himself to a play of power unrivalled in modern poetry. Always, as I have said, it is the man exploited rather than the theme treated—it is action, power, personality ; it is me, it is you ; it is our privileges and opportunities ; it is faith, hope, charity ; it is the body, the soul, immortality ; it is our mastery over the facts of nature and destiny. He gives scenes, pictures, momentary glances as in nature, but no architectonics, no finished verbal structure—nothing apart from his personality.

We have the poet's own word that the main *motif* of his book is the treatment of man as he is in himself, in his own rights:—

"Pressing the pulse of the life that has seldom exhibited itself (the great pride of man in himself)"—

in contradistinction to the bards of the past—who have treated man as the "creature of politics, aggregates, rulers, and priests."

The poets of English literature have no doubt treated human nature more or less relatively, or as showing itself in particular conditions facing this or that problem or circumstance, rather than unloosed and confronting them all.

Our poet's aim is to outline a typical democratic man and to treat him absolutely as he is in himself, to speak out of the facts of the human body, the human passions, and the moral and spiritual nature *per se*, without any reference to precedents or conventions, or to schools or creeds; to unfold and exploit the natural abysmal man, stripped of all artificial trappings, freed from many of the distinctions imposed upon him in civilized society and exulting in that freedom.

If this looks like a return to the savage—to the barbarian—the reader has only to refer to the poems themselves to see that this is not what is meant. It is the highly developed man—the man atop of the science and the humanity of the nineteenth century—that is stripped and exploited, stripped of all ecclesiasticism, but imbued with a profound religious spirit; stripped of poetic traditions, but charged with poetic insight and emotion; stripped of political prejudices and preferences, but filled with the most determined patriotism; freed from artificial checks and restraints, but quickly responsive to all generous instincts and impulses; upholding temperance, chastity, spirituality; cherishing the old, the poor, the deformed, the despised; bringing the woman flush with the man; exulting in the purity and sacredness of every organ and attribute of the human body, and speaking out of that conviction with absolute freedom and directness.

It was no part of the poet's plan to exhibit man as a member of society, or the club, or the church, or the family, or the state, but absolutely as a member of the universal brotherhood of man, acted upon and swayed by forces that make for the longevity and perpetuity of the race. Had his purpose been to show him as subject to laws and conventions, to family ties and to worldly prudence, the outcome had been different. We should have had no "Children of Adam," no exposures of what social usage covers up, no exhibition of "that pride which refuses every lesson but its own."

Everywhere the poet identifies himself with this typical, composite, democratic man, measuring himself by the largest standards, matching his spirit against the cosmic forces, and appropriating to himself all the sins, sufferings, joys, heroism of mankind:

"I match my spirit against yours, your orbs, growths, mountains, brutes,
Copious as you are, I absorb you all in myself and become the master myself.

This same composite, all-embracing character is seen in the poet whom he outlines and illustrates:

"Whichever the sex, whatever the season or place, he may go freshly, and gently, and safely, by day or by night,
He has the pass-key of hearts—to him the responses of the prying of hands on the knobs,
His welcome is universal—the flow of beauty is not more welcome or universal than he is."

"The mechanics take him for a mechanic,
And the soldiers suppose him to be a captain, and the sailors that he has followed the sea,
And the authors take him for an author, and the artists for an artist,
And the laborers perceive he could labor with them and love them,
No matter what the work is, that he is one to follow it, or has followed it,
No matter what the nation, that he might find his brothers and sisters there."

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"The gentleman of perfect blood acknowledges his perfect blood,
The insulter, the prostitute, the angry person, the beggar see themselves in the ways of him—he strangely transmutes them,
They are not vile any more—they hardly know themselves, they are so grown."

Whitman averages up the race, but the whole push and stress of his work is to raise the average.

"I announce a man or woman coming—perhaps you are the one.
I announce a great individual, fluid as nature, chaste, affectionate, compassionate, fully armed.
I announce a life that shall be copious, vehement, spiritual, bold.
And I announce an old age that shall lightly and joyfully meet its translation."

Since the above pages were written the subject of them has passed from this life. Serenely, expectantly, almost joyously, did he meet his translation. Blessed release from the bondage of disease and pain! As we performed the last solemn rites over his remains that March day in a Camden cemetery, the sun shone, the birds warbled, the waters glinted, and a great spirit of contentment and triumph seemed to brood over the earth,—all typical of the "large, sweet soul that has gone." Huge granite blocks, dear Master and friend, guard the portals of thy tomb, but the symbols of thee in our hearts will always be the sunshine, the tender and budding growths, and the flowing currents of the world.

JOHN BURROUGHS,